

New Normals Are Messy: Conversations in Ezra and Nehemiah

Week 8 – Nehemiah 11-13

As we return to sanctuaries and church activities after such a long time being apart from one another and having our routines and practices disrupted, we know that things won't just "go back to normal" overnight. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the unique history of Israel's return to Jerusalem and the surrounding towns following around seventy years of exile in Babylon. The returning and rebuilding processes were messy, to say the least.

This is our last week looking at these two books together, and seeing what the living Word has to teach us from their experiences for our situation today. Today we'll finish our series with a look at Nehemiah 11-13, with the resettlement of Jerusalem continuing and Nehemiah's second term as governor.

Read Nehemiah 11:1-2. Now that the leaders and nobles and temple officials were settled, and the wall and gates were completed, it's time to fill out the rest of the city – by casting lots. Also make note of the fact that there must be a whole lot of people living in the towns around Jerusalem, outside the wall.

- Have you ever made a big decision by casting lots, or drawing straws, or flipping a coin? How did it turn out? Would you recommend that method to others? Do you think a coincidence is God at work, or do you think God just works to make anything turn towards the good, no matter how randomly it came about?

Nehemiah 11:3-36 is a census of those settling in Jerusalem, as well as a list of the towns. The list continues in 12:1-16 with a listing of the priests and Levites and their entourage. Remember that the priests were descended from Aaron, Moses' brother, and were primarily in charge of the Temple; Levites were descended from Levi, the only one of Jacob's twelve sons that inherited a vocation rather than a swath of land. The Levites assisted the priests, and also worked with people's daily rituals and responsibilities in the towns.

Read 12:27-31, 38a, 43. Nehemiah led a two-pronged procession around the city, encircling it with celebration, praise, and thanksgiving. Here is a note from the Study Bible: "The circumambulation of the walls is carried out by two processions starting at the same place, walking along the top of the wall in opposite directions and meeting finally in the temple area. Each procession has a choir, a group of lay nobles, seven priests, and eight Levite musicians. With vocal music in front and instrumental music in the rear, they must have been enveloped in stereophonic sound..."

- How do you celebrate? What joyful noises do you make? What was your last joyful noise about?

Read 13:1-3. Once again the Israelites are trying to maintain purity, once again expelling the foreigners.

- Contrast this with how “outsiders” are dealt with in the New Testament – how do Jesus, Peter, and Paul respond to Gentiles, Romans, Samaritans, and other “foreigners”?
- As our country is about to absorb an unprecedented amount of refugees from Afghanistan – on top of the already-present press of immigrants and asylum-seekers and refugees – what does Scripture teach us? How do we sort out the mixed message?

Read 13:4-14. Remember Nehemiah’s enemy from Ammon, Tobiah? The one who kept taunting and threatening and plotting against the wall-building efforts and against Jerusalem getting re-established at all? He’s baa-aack! While Nehemiah is back in Persia checking in with King Artaxerxes, the priest Eliashib, who is related to Tobiah, clears out a part of the Temple to make some rooms for Tobiah. This broke so many rules! When Nehemiah returns, he clears out the chambers, re-fills them with the supplies that were intended for the Levites, who, in the meantime, had to move back to the towns and work in the fields to make ends meet, which meant that temple activities were drastically reduced. You can almost hear Nehemiah, like an exasperated parent, grinding his teeth and yelling, “This is why we can’t have nice things!”

- How fragile was their new start? How fragile is the church today?
- Making accommodations for Tobiah has a domino effect to the Levites and the temple. Everything was connected. In a different way, some people treat their life of faith and religion as one big spiderweb – everything is connected, held in tension. This means that changing the style of worship is just as momentous as hearing a new and controversial interpretation of the Bible. If one strand is plucked, the whole structure shakes. What would be your one strand?

Read 13:15-22. First Nehemiah had to repair the damage to the temple system. Now he is repairing damage to sabbath observance. He is seeing first hand, after his brief time away, the forgetfulness and short attention span of his people. At the end of each of these passages, he asks God to remember him, and his deeds, almost as if he didn’t want God to hold the people’s actions against him as their leader.

- What mustn’t we forget?
- To what degree are we accountable to one another in the body of Christ? To what degree *are* we our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers? Will our neighbors’ sins be remembered in terms of them only, or also of us?
- Nehemiah uses the power of his office as governor to lock the gates and shoo away the merchants, in order to get the people to observe the sabbath once again. As we have established, this was a very different time and context and culture; however, in what ways does

the government ensure proper religious observance today? Prosecuting hate crimes and vandalism of houses of worship, perhaps? Enforcing the separation of church and state? If Nehemiah closed the walls to protect the people from their own poor sabbath-related decisions, is there a parallel with mask mandates to protect people from their own public health decisions? (I realize I am stirring the pot with this one. 😊)

Read 3:23-31. And now there is more non-Jewish intermarriage. Nehemiah calls a stop to the practice, but doesn't go as far as Ezra 9-10. The scholars estimate that this go-round occurred around thirty years later. It would seem that the practice of marrying non-Jews never really stopped. Perhaps a sense of resignation has set in? Nehemiah just wants to make sure folks are still learning the language and the Law of Judah, but his reaction of beating people is still problematic, to say the least.

Also, in verse 28, we have another son-in-law-enemy: Sanballat the Samaritan's daughter married the high priest's son. Nehemiah runs him out, and once again asks God to remember him for his good, and not for the people's almost-unbelievable sin-repeats.

- What lessons do we as Christians seem to have a problem remembering?
- Verse 26 says "Did not King Solomon of Israel sin on account of such women...foreign women made even him to sin." Here's my question: really? It was the *women* who made King Solomon sin? Really? I'll refer back to his dad David and Bathsheba and Uriah and that whole situation. I don't have much more of a question here, just wanted to point out – even the greatest heroes in the Bible had some issues, and were still human, and sinful humans are also part of the transcribing process of scripture. Thank you, Holy Spirit, for preserving the living Word throughout history despite us!

As Ezra-Nehemiah draws to a close, we see the cycle continue: the same cycle that we have seen since the time of the judges, a cycle of human sin and forgetfulness and God's deliverance and steadfastness. Ezra and Nehemiah, each in their own ways, try to reform and reset the people alongside the rebuilding and resettling efforts. Yet the same old sins and mistakes creep back in almost immediately.

You might not realize this, since Ezra and Nehemiah are books 15 and 16 out of 39 Old Testament books, but they are the last chapter in the history of God's people in the First Testament. With the possible exception of Esther, and some parallel prophets like Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Obadiah, Joel, and (Third) Isaiah, this is the end of the historical side of the story in our Bible until Jesus comes along.

- First, what do you think of that? If this were a series finale, how would you feel?
- If Jesus is the next chapter, how do the Gospels respond directly to where Ezra and Nehemiah leave off?

New normals are messy, especially when the new normal might feel like a newly packaged rerun of the old normal. That is, if it were only up to us. Paul says that, in Christ, everything old has passed away, and that God makes us new through our baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection. So, enough about what *we* are doing; what new things is God doing, right now, to rebuild and rededicate the Church on earth? And when we see those new things, are we up on the walls in a stereophonic envelope of praise and thanksgiving, or are we inviting sin's son-in-law to furnish a room in our hearts?

Even if God is making the best new normal ever for us right now, it might still feel messy to us in the transition. As we get back into buildings, where are you on the messiness gauge? As we participate in the new chapter of Christianity that is currently unfolding, where are you at on the messiness gauge?

Many thanks to everyone for coming along for the journey on these two books. We're going to take a week off on the midweek messages as we get ready for our Sunday school kickoff on September 12th. If you'd like to continue to delve into this part of the biblical story, check out some of those prophets I mentioned – Obadiah, Joel, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and Isaiah 56-66. Or, read Ezra and Nehemiah, and then go straight to one of the Gospels.

Stay tuned for our next study!

Sources

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